

TRADITION

BY

JOSEPH CONRAD

LONDON :

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1919

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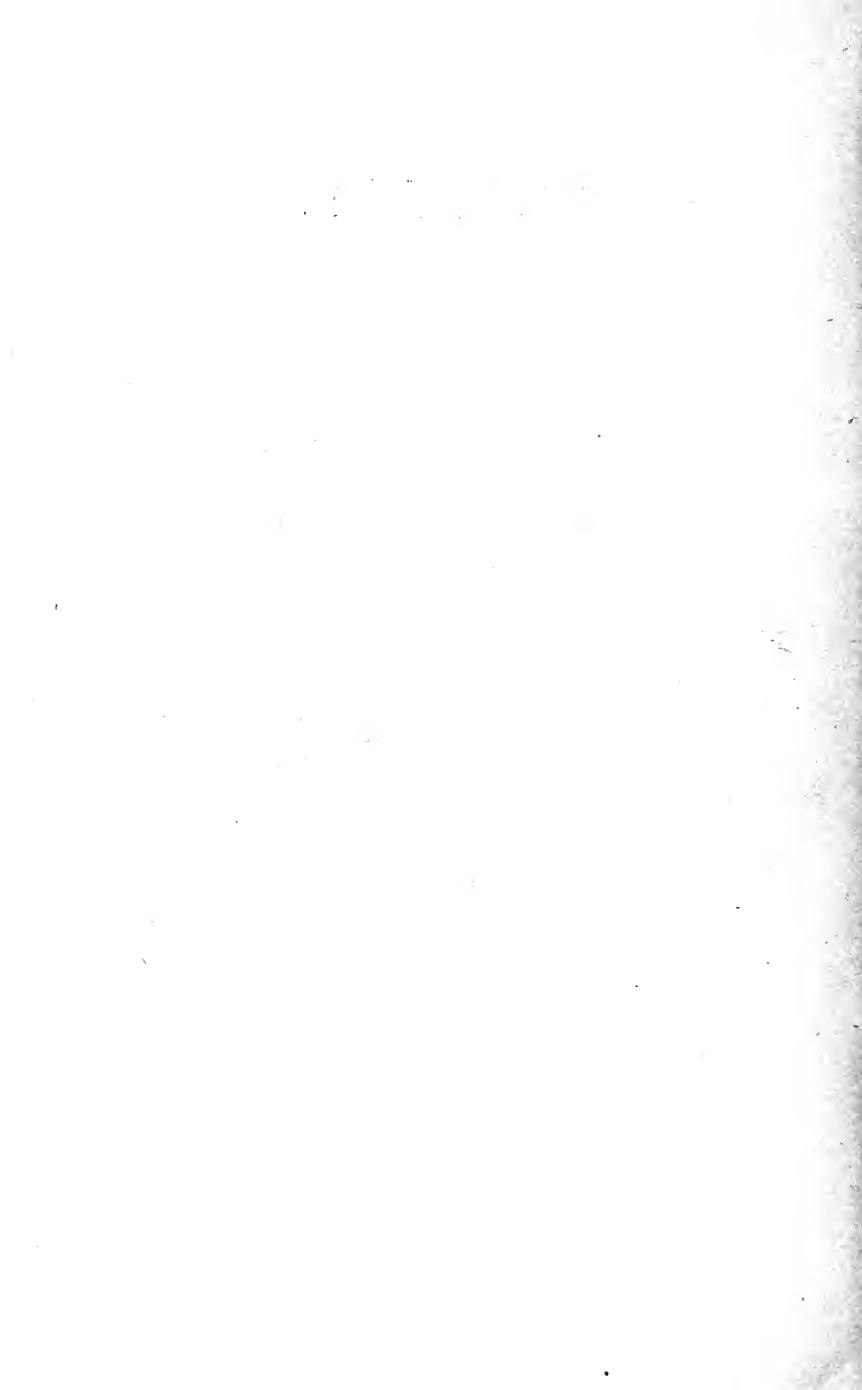
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WORK is the law. Like iron that lying idle about degenerates into a mass of useless rust, like water that in an unruffled pool sickens into a stagnant and corrupt state, so without action the spirit of men turns to a dead thing, loses its force, ceases to inspire us to leave some trace of ourselves on this earth. The sense of the above lines does not belong to me. It may be found in the note-books of one of the greatest artists that ever lived, Leonardo da Vinci. It has a simplicity and a truth which no amount of subtle comment can destroy.

The Master who had meditated so deeply on the rebirth of arts and sciences, on the inward beauty of all things—ships' lines, women's faces—and on the visible aspects of nature was profoundly

right in his pronouncement on the work that is done on the earth. From the hard work of men are born the sympathetic consciousness of a common destiny, the fidelity to right practice which makes great craftsmen, that sense of right conduct which we may call honour, the devotion to our calling and the idealism which is not a misty, winged angel without eyes, but a divine figure of terrestrial aspect with a clear glance and with its feet resting firmly on the earth on which it was born.

And work will overcome all evil, except ignorance, which is the condition of humanity and, like the ambient air, fills the space between the various sorts and conditions of men, which breeds hatred, fear, and contempt between the masses of mankind and puts on men's lips, on their innocent lips, words that are thoughtless and vain.

Thoughtless, for instance, were the words that (in all innocence, I believe) came on the lips of

a prominent statesman making in the House of Commons an eulogistic reference to the British Merchant Service. In this name I include men of diverse status and origin, who live on and by the sea, by it exclusively, outside all professional pretensions and social formulas, men for whom not only their daily bread but their collective character, their personal achievement, and their individual merit come from the sea. Those words of the statesman were meant kindly ; but, after all, this is not a complete excuse. Rightly or wrongly, we expect from a man of national importance a larger, at the same time a more scrupulous precision of speech, for it is possible that it may go echoing down the ages. His words were :

“ It is right when thinking of the Navy not to forget the men of the Merchant Service, who have shown—and it is more surprising because they have had no traditions towards it—courage as great,” etc., etc.

And then he went on talking of the execution of Captain Fryatt, an event of undying memory, but less connected with the permanent, unchangeable conditions of sea service than with the wrong view German minds delight in taking of Englishmen's psychology. The enemy, he said, meant by this atrocity to frighten our sailors away from the sea.

“What has happened?” he goes on to ask.

“Never at any time in peace have sailors stayed so short a time ashore or shown such a readiness to step again into a ship.”

Which means, in other words, that they answered to the call. I should like to know at what time of history the English Merchant Service, the great body of merchant seamen, had failed to answer the call. Noticed or unnoticed, ignored or commended, they have answered invariably the call to do their work, the very conditions of which made them what they are. They have always served

the nation's needs through their own invariable fidelity to the demands of their special life ; but with the development and complexity of material civilisation they grew less prominent to the nation's eye among all the vast schemes of national industry. Never was the need greater and the call to the service more urgent than to-day. And those inconspicuous workers on whose qualities depends so much of the national welfare have answered it without dismay, facing risk without glory, in the perfect faithfulness to that tradition which the speech of the statesman denies to them at the very moment when he thinks fit to praise their courage . . . and mention his surprise !

The hour of opportunity has struck—not for the first time—for the Merchant Service ; and if I associate myself with all my heart in the admiration and the praise which is the greatest reward of brave men I must be excused from joining in any sentiment of surprise. It is perhaps

because I have not been born to the inheritance of that tradition which has yet fashioned the fundamental part of my character in my young days that I am so consciously aware of it and venture to vindicate its existence in this outspoken manner.

Merchant seamen have always been what they are now, from their earliest days, and before the Royal Navy had been fashioned out of the material they furnished for the hands of kings and statesmen. Their work has made them, as work undertaken with single-minded devotion makes men, giving to their achievements that vitality and continuity in which their souls are expressed, tempered and matured through the succeeding generations. In its simplest definition the work of merchant seamen has been to take ships entrusted to their care from port to port across the seas ; and, from the highest to the lowest, to watch and labour with devotion for the safety of the property

and the lives committed to their skill and fortitude through the hazards of innumerable voyages.

That was always the clear task, the single aim, the simple ideal, the only problem for an unselfish solution. The terms of it have changed with the years, its risks have worn different aspects from time to time. There are no longer any unexplored seas. Human ingenuity has devised better means to meet the dangers of natural forces. But it is always the same problem. The youngsters who were growing up at sea at the end of my service are commanding ships now. At least I have heard of some of them who do. And whatever the shape and power of their ships the character of the duty remains the same. A mine or a torpedo that strikes your ship is not so very different from a sharp, uncharted rock tearing her life out of her in another way. At a greater cost of vital energy, under the well-nigh intolerable stress of vigilance and resolution, they are doing steadily the work of

their professional forefathers in the midst of multiplied dangers. They go to and fro across the oceans on their everlasting task: the same men, the same stout hearts, the same fidelity to an exacting tradition created by simple toilers who in their time knew how to live and die at sea.

Allowed to share in this work and in this tradition for something like twenty years, I am bold enough to think that perhaps I am not altogether unworthy to speak of it. It was the sphere not only of my activity but, I may safely say, also of my affections; but after such a close connection it is very difficult to avoid bringing in one's own personality. Without looking at all at the aspects of the Labour problem, I can safely affirm that I have never, never seen British seamen refuse any risk, any exertion, any effort of spirit or body up to the extremest demands of their calling. Years ago—it seems ages ago—I have seen the crew of a British ship fight the fire in the cargo for a whole

sleepless week and then, with her decks blown up, I have seen them still continue the fight to save the floating shell. And at last I have seen them refuse to be taken off by a vessel standing by, and this only in order "to see the last of our ship," at the word, at the simple word, of a man who commanded them, a worthy soul indeed, but of no heroic aspect. I have seen that. I have shared their days in small boats. Hard days. Ages ago. And now let me mention a story of to-day.

I will try to relate it here mainly in the words of the chief engineer of a certain steamship which, after bunkering, left Lerwick bound for Iceland. The weather was cold, the sea pretty rough, with a stiff head wind. All went well till next day, about 1.30 p.m., the captain sighted a suspicious object far away to starboard. Speed was increased at once to close in with the Faroes and good look-outs were set fore and aft. Nothing further was

seen of the suspicious object, but about half-past three without any warning the ship was struck amidships by a torpedo which exploded in the bunkers. None of the crew was injured by the explosion, and all hands, without exception, behaved admirably.

The chief officer with his watch managed to lower the No. 3 boat. Two other boats had been shattered by the explosion, and though another lifeboat was cleared and ready, there was no time to lower it, and "some of us jumped while others were washed overboard. Meantime the captain had been busy handing lifebelts to the men and cheering them up with words and smiles, with no thought of his own safety." The ship went down in less than four minutes. The captain was the last man on board, going down with her, and was sucked under. On coming up he was caught under an upturned boat to which five hands were clinging. "One lifeboat," says the chief

engineer, " which was floating empty in the distance was cleverly manœuvred to our assistance by the steward, who swam off to her pluckily. Our next endeavour was to release the captain, who was entangled under the boat. As it was impossible to right her, we set to to split her side open with the boat hook, because by awful bad luck the head of the axe we had flew off at the first blow and was lost. The work took thirty minutes, and the extricated captain was in a pitiable condition, being badly bruised and having swallowed a lot of salt water. He was unconscious. While at that work the submarine came to the surface quite close and made a complete circle round us, the seven men which we counted on the conning tower laughing at our efforts.

" There were eighteen of us saved. I deeply regret the loss of the chief officer, a fine fellow and a kind shipmate showing splendid promise. The other men lost—one A.B., one greaser, and

two firemen—were quiet, conscientious, good fellows.”

With no restoratives in the boat, they endeavoured to bring the captain round by means of massage. Meantime the oars were got out in order to reach the Faroes, which were about 30 miles dead to windward, but after about 9 hours' hard work they had to desist, and, putting out the sea-anchor, they took shelter under the canvas boat-cover from the cold wind and torrential rain. Says the narrator: “ We were all very wet and miserable, and decided to have two biscuits all round. The effects of this and being under the shelter of the canvas warmed us up and made us feel pretty well contented. At about sunrise the captain showed signs of recovery, and by the time the sun was up he was looking a lot better, much to our relief.”

After being informed of what had been done the revived captain “dropped a bombshell in

our midst" by proposing to make for the Shetlands, which were *only* 150 miles off. "The wind is in our favour," he said. "I will take you there. Are you all willing?" This—comments the chief engineer—"from a man who but a few hours previously had been hauled back from the grave!" The captain's confident manner inspired them, and they all agreed. Under the best possible conditions a boat-run of 150 miles in the North Atlantic and in winter weather would have been a feat of no mean merit, but in the circumstances it required a man of uncommon nerve and skill to make such a proposal. With an oar for a mast and the boat-cover cut down for a sail they started on their dangerous journey, with the boat compass and the stars for their guide. The captain's undaunted serenity buoyed them all up against despondency. He told them what point he was making for. It was Ronas Hill—"and we struck it as straight as a die."

The chief engineer commends also the ship steward for the manner in which he made the little food they had last, the cheery spirit he manifested, and the great help he was to the captain by keeping the men in good humour. That trusty man had "his hands cruelly chafed with the rowing, but it never damped his spirits."

They made Ronas Hill (as straight as a die), and the chief engineer cannot express the feeling of gratitude and relief they all experienced when they set their feet on the shore. He praises the unbounded kindness of the people in Hillswick. "It seemed to us all like *Paradise Regained*," he says, concluding his letter with the words :

"And there was our captain, just his usual self, as if nothing had happened, as if bringing the boat that hazardous journey and being the means of saving 18 souls was to him an everyday occurrence."

Such is the chief engineer's testimony to the continuity of the old tradition of the sea, which made by the work of men has in its turn created for them their simple ideal of conduct.

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